RICHARD STANFORD

The Chevy Belair

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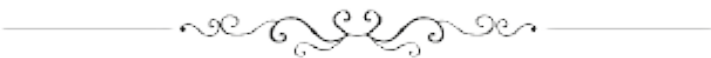

The Chevy Belair

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The closing lines of Reuben's weekly column rolled out from the typewriter. The radio was on. Buddy Holly, *Not Fade Away* and he typed to the rhythm:*bop…bop..bopbop…bop…bop…bopbop…*" Through the curtain of snow dual headlight beams sliced across the ceiling. He concentrated on the last line while outside the rumbling of a car engine cut out, a door opened and closed and Lydia greeted a man at the back door. Where had he been this time? Kingston? New York?

"Hey kid, how you doing?" Leo's tall silhouette filled the doorway of his room. He stepped in, the light falling on his dark eyebrows and blue eyes, pale skin and rich dark hair combed in a wave from his forehead. In his hands he twirled a brown fedora which seemed to Reuben to be an oddity with his jean jacket, black shirt with white buttons, black pleated pants and Converses. He was dressed more for spring than he was for a winter blizzard.

"I have to deliver my column to *The Gleaner* before the night's out," said Reuben.

His mother shouted from the kitchen: "You're not taking that over in this weather."

Leo stepped into the room. Books filled the shelves, magazines and newspapers were stacked on the floor, yet there was no indication a sixteen-year old was living in it. There was no sports equipment or games and the only colourful object was a poster reproduction of *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* pinned on the wall.

"Your grandmother," said Leo.

"So they say."

"You ever go out with friends and play?"

"Yeah, I play. With this," said Reuben typing a last word on the page.

"You've been doing this for a while?"

"A couple of years. I have a column."

"A columnist…already."

"It's not what I want to do. I want to do television," he said looking back intently at Leo.

He could see the boy had grown into a young man since Wallace and Lydia had divorced. "Good for you, kid," he said, like an uncle.

Instead of following the aroma of minestrone soup, Leo walked down the corridor to the French doors, opened them and entered the cold, dark sunroom. The room wasn't heated and not much used in the

winter. It was like that when Leo and his mother lived here but it never bothered Esther. For seven years she placed her easel facing the northwest where the sun would set. This was the best location to view the panorama where the Châteauguay River broke from its narrow banks and widened by a mile into the distance. Here she would paint the river every single day whether it was frozen or freely flowing. When not painting, she would mount her Kodak Pocket camera on a tripod and take photographs of the river from the backyard. Leo would sit on the couch covered in quilt blankets and reading. He would glance up to watch his mother create a different image each day from the same flat sculpture of the river. To Leo, the scene was unchanging, but Esther saw something singular from one day to the next: soft touches of brown reflected on the snow one day, a blue mist the next, and sometimes a dense fog obliterating all detail. She studied that river as if she had put it under a microscope.

"Claude Monet," she replied when Leo asked her why she was obsessing over the same scene day after day.

"Claude Monet? What? You and him ran out of subjects to paint?"

"No. I'm doing the same thing he did. For two years he painted the front portal of Rouen Cathedral in all kinds of weather. He did the same thing with his water-lily ponds. That took him another ten years."

"I don't get it," said Leo.

"It's about light, the way light imparts a distinct character at different times of the day and the year and as the weather changes. The light is as important as the river itself. So I'm actually not painting the same thing every day."

Esther held her brush in her left hand and with a quick darting motion left curled brushstrokes of thick paint on the canvas. Close-up, the chaos of contrasting colours made no visual sense but when

one stepped back the stony white silence seemed to vibrate. Esther painted over four hundred canvases in those years. Some of them are hanging in galleries around the world, and yet each was as unique from the other as human fingerprints.

Leo looked out the window to the northwest. The river could not be seen on this night, hidden in the blowing snow. He closed the French doors and returned to the kitchen.

For all the whispering, they never knew much about Leo's world. Reuben suspected Leo said nothing so they wouldn't have anything to tell the police if they ever came calling. Reuben slid his article into a manila envelope, put on his parka and hat, and followed the aromas of basil and red onion.

Lydia and Leo were wrapped up in low tones and laughter when Reuben came in. He sampled the soup.

"And where do you think you're going, mister?"

said Lydia. Reuben raised the envelope. "You're not going out into that."

"You know: 'neither rain, nor snow, nor sleet nor hail'? It's the second one."

"That's for mailmen, genius. Get your mottos straight."

"I'll take him," said Leo. Lydia dialed up her 'you've got to be kidding' face. "Don't worry. I'm on parole, remember. Let me finish my soup here, kid. How far is news printer?"

"About six miles."

The Bel Air was idling when Reuben came out the back door. The windshield wipers were beating back the snow. Leo tossed a brush to Reuben. He wiped snow off the rear windshield exposing a decal, in large script: Rollin' Lonely. Bel Airs were two-tone; this one was turquoise with white trim, ornamental spears recessed into the hood, the lines curling back, climaxing with sharp sword fins tipped in chrome

projecting into space at the rear. The whole look of the thing suggested that with the right velocity it could fly, cutting its way through the swirling storm.

Reuben sat in the front seat. "This car should be on a beach surrounded by women in bikinis," he said. Leo pulled down on the gearshift, the engine hummed like an airplane, pushing the Bel-Air forward, its wheels digging into the wet snow plowing it aside. The real test would be the wind coming off the river – strong even in the summertime.

"It's in good shape."

"She's only seven years old. When I'm away I put her in storage."

"Did you steal it?"

Leo took his eyes of the invisible road to glare at Reuben. "I'm not deaf," said Reuben. "I hear Mom talking on the phone to Aunt Esther. Watch the road."

Leo pulled on the steering wheel with one finger,

guiding the car into the wind. The thick, wet snow came down in billows, sticking to the windshield faster than the wipers could clear them away. Reuben watched Leo caress the steering wheel, not forcing it but teasing it with light touches of his fingers, keeping it under control.

"I didn't steal *Rollin' Lonely*." he said sharply. It made him angry. It was one thing to get caught actually stealing, it was quite another for this squirt to assume he had. "What do they say about me?"

"Nothing much. I know you've done time."

Three years before, Lydia had gone out, forgetting the front page of the *Montreal Daily Star* on the kitchen table. Reuben had seen the article and the photograph – a mug shot, of course. Unlike others, Leo's expression said '*come and get me*'. Reuben wondered if Leo understood the irony of his gaze, and that it had gotten him five years for theft and forgery.

The snow whirled down through the silent black-

ness, the headlights illuminating snow drifts crossing the road in waves. Leo aimed the Bel Air towards the faint beam of a streetlamp further down the road. It occurred to Reuben that Leo would know this road well. He had lived here with his mother Esther for five years and he likely could have driven it with his eyes closed. The storm amounted to the same thing.

"I've done a little time. Not much. I never hurt anybody, if that's what you're worried about and I've never used a gun. My last stint was for three years."

"I thought it was five."

Leo smiled at Reuben and shook his head. This kid thinks he knows all the answers. "I got parole for good behavior. It happens. You think I should be locked up for more?"

"I think when a judge sentences you to five years, you should do the five. Otherwise, what's the point of having a judge? Good behavior? What the hell does that mean? You're supposed to be on good be-

havior in prison. That's the whole point." Leo kept his eyes on the road, trying let the barrage bounce off him. "You're wasting the best years of your life. What kind of a life is prison without the romanticism, right? You keep getting caught, so it doesn't appear your career path is working out so well. So this car being stolen is not outside the realm of possibility."

"Romanticism?"

"Yeah. I've read all the prison shit. Genet. Oscar Wilde. It's a great place to write poetry and lose your mind in creative bliss and go stark raving mad because you can't see the sky or hear a woman moan."

"You're sixteen. What the hell do you know about a woman moaning?"

"A lot more than you think. The way they tell it, prison is a regular poets' society if you can close your ears to all the screaming. That's why people run like crazy just to get into a prison for a grand old holiday

just to get away from it all. You get away from it all right."

Leo took in a deep breath; what was going on outside was nothing like what was going on in here. "I steal other things." Reuben stared at him, his gaze demanding more. "I work by contracts, not signed ones. A handshake will do. On my last job, I was hired to steal designer's drawings for a women's fashion line."

"What the hell for?"

"If a fashion designer knows what a competitor is doing months in advance the information could be worth millions. He can beat them to the punch. They keep their distance, use an intermediary to hire me. I get a few thousand, no paper trail, no mess."

"No mess? You got caught."

"Not for that one. I got caught for aircraft designs." That one stung Leo particularly hard. He fell for the job and the money without realizing the ghost client

was a foreign government. Suddenly it became espionage and the RCMP got involved.

"Why you?"

"Because I can crack open any safe without making a sound." Suddenly the steering wheel spun around sending the Bel Air into a skid, heading for the riverbank, the invisible frozen river somewhere beyond. Reuben took in a breath. Leo left the steering wheel alone and pressed on the accelerator, the back end fish-tailed, the wheels spun. The engine revved, the black precipice came closer. Reuben glanced at Leo who starred ahead stone-faced. The back end swung, the wheels dug into the snow, the engine slowed and Leo steered the car back into the lane.

"And jewelry. I love jewelry," said Leo. He glanced over at Reuben and saw the street light rolling slowly over his deep set eyes staring straight ahead and aquiline nose, his long hair reflecting the dancing light of falling snow. Leo saw that when Reuben looked at something, he looked at it directly while at the same

time seemingly indifferent to what he was viewing. There was bristle to him like steel wool rubbing at the neck. It didn't bother him that his cousin held those 'tough-on-crime' opinions – there were many inmates, his con-friends, who felt the same way – but he couldn't understand it coming from what was supposed to be a blood-relative. He wasn't going to change his views or even try but he had to know if he could turn to Reuben if he needed him. That is in the blood.

"What happened with your Mom and Dad?"

Reuben didn't answer right away. He stared at the blowing snow. "Mom just didn't want to play second fiddle to a newspaper any longer."

"Do you see him?"

"We see each other every couple of weeks. He has me doing copywriting at *The Chronicle* whenever I go down to visit."

The fluorescent lights were glowing in the one-sto-

rey brick building housing *The Gleaner* when Leo slid the Bel Air to a stop. They trudged through the snow and walked into the clattering of teletype machines as spools of paper with news from around the world piling in waves on the floor. Banks of fluorescent lights hung above slanted glass-topped desks where men in white-shirts with sleeves rolled to their elbows conferred over stacks of copy and photographs.

"Reuben, I didn't think you'd make it." It was the voice of Wilma Greene standing in the middle of the press room. She was taller than every man in the room but like them she wore pants, albeit feminine pants with narrow pleats at the waist. Her fingers were long, spidery, the fingernails polished in fuchsia making them easy to see in the gyrations of constant motion she put them through while typing, reading copy or running them through her thick brown hair. In her world, everything was copy. She was not afraid to publish short stories in *The Gleaner*, or novels by installments. It was a bold move for a newspaper whose readership were mainly farmers and the

big news stories were articles on grain prices or the best insecticide spray for apple trees. Greene knew that farmers had as much desire to read literature as anyone else. It also meant that she was ready to give any kid an opportunity to write if they loved the smell of ink. Driving through a snowstorm certainly qualified. "Give your copy to Steadman over there," she said pointing to one of the proofreaders.

"There's still time?" asked Reuben.

"We got nothing but time. Now who's this?" Wilma's eyes all inquisitive.

Leo introduced himself as Reuben's uncle. Reuben rolled his eyes. This was Leo's way of showing off some parental authority that he could play at; easy to do as he was never around long enough for anyone to question it. It wasn't long before Leo and Wilma Greene were talking as if they had known each other for years.

An hour later, Reuben's article was typeset, laid out

on page three and ready for printing. The presses whirred up to speed and Reuben felt the thrumming coming up from the floor. The pressman at the end of the line gestured to Reuben and handed him a copy of *The Gleaner*, shouting out over the din, "Fresh off the press." Reuben scanned the front page for January17th, 1965. It contained a cover page story on the death of a local teenager in a collision with a CPR freight train at the Ormstown level crossing, accompanied by a photograph of a block of twisted metal. There was an assortment of bid listings of farmers' market apple prices, an article on a new formulation in hog feed, outraged letters to the editor, notices of blood donor clinics, announcements for a meeting of the St. Andrew's United Church Women's Auxiliary, the Literary Society, details on the upcoming spring reenactment of the 1813 Battle of Châteauguay sponsored by the Historical Society, a scathing editorial on the latest federal cabinet minister caught in bed with a call-girl, a Believe It or Not column of fetish facts, the Farmers' Almanac spring weather predic-

tions, League Bantam and Midget hockey scores, a serialized installment of Frank Marcus' "The Killing of Sister George" and at the top of page three Reuben's column on the lost years of Henri Dunant.

Up to now Reuben's articles had been tame: fundraising events, blood drives, disaster appeals. But this article was different. It was a change of tone for Reuben. His story about Henri Dunant, the founder of the International Red Cross, used the diary and the original newspaper articles written by his grandfather George Lloyd-Craig. Before her death, his grandmother Aline had given George's writings to Lydia in the hopes that one day a university or historical society would archive the material. No one ever did. Deep into many a night, Reuben poured over George's journals, the elegant script detailing an account of his search for and relationship with Henri Dunant in 1885, the material that did not end up in his *Die Ostschweiz* articles: "*I have come to the conclusion that Dunant's six months of silence after Solferino, his 20 years in the undergrounds of Paris, and his*

ceaseless walking, in which I have been an active participant these past several days, suggests he suffers from a profound psychological trauma, having witnessed obscene post-battle horrors and where his attempts to alleviate the suffering of hundreds of wounded men more often than not led to their deaths. Such a nightmare would have set back any man. It is remarkable that while suffering such trauma he was nonetheless able to single-handedly construct the most significant humanitarian enterprise in human history."

He used the quote in his article, attributing his grandfather, and went on to tell a different story about Dunant. Reuben knew his condition was commonly termed these days as 'shell shock' but until the World War I there was no word for it. Reuben figured he also knew why George's conclusion had not made it into the newspaper articles but he made up for the omission by drawing it himself in his article: "*Even in the late 19th century, the symptoms of shell shock were well-known: incoherent babbling, fits, tremors, pacing, recurring nightmares, among others.*

Henri Dunant did not exhibit any of those behaviours. To anyone looking at him he would have appeared perfectly rational, able to articulate this most fantastic of dreams, when in fact, inside he was a churning mass of sorrow…"

A wave of cold air and snow blew into the printing room as the sliding doors at the loading bay clanged open. Reuben watched as several young men tied off the newspaper stacks with twine, piled them into trolleys and wheeled them into the cargo bays where five trucks idled, spewing thick clouds of grey exhaust into the cold night. One of the trucks was filled, the driver pulled down the gate and drove off into the swirling snow carrying Reuben's article into someone's living room. He looked over to where Leo and Wilma were last talking and saw that they were gone. He found Wilma at her desk talking to her typewriter.

"Your uncle just left," she said. "You need a ride home?"

"I'll be fine, thanks. And he's not my uncle. He's my cousin." He grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

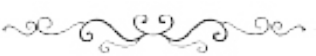
"It's a good article, Reuben. I like it," as she carried on typing.

"Thanks," he said and stepped outside.

The snow had stopped, the air was biting cold and clear. The stars were diamonds, the wind had calmed and it was quiet. Reuben walked to the edge of the sidewalk, looked down at the tire tracks of the BelAir, turned his head to follow their trail cutting through the blue snow down the street and vanishing into the darkness. He waited a few moments, knowing that he would never see the headlights coming back towards him. This was Leo's answer. He looked the opposite way and started walking for home. Only the tops of cedars were visible and a rough pasture was now a smooth field except for the humps and mounds like haycocks where the snow had drifted over a post or bush.

It was two o'clock in the morning and across the street Reuben saw through the picture window of a house. The home was dark, but a chandelier sparkled from the light of street lamps. In another house an upstairs light was on: either a shift worker or an insomniac. Is this how Leo staked out a place, Reuben thought, peering nonchalantly at houses while taking in geography and architecture – the easiest way in. What does it take to make that leap? From curiosity to the daring invasion, the rush, the climbing and the running, the constant running, to spend the money as fast as you can, always being hunted. No wonder Leo drives like that. He probably never sleeps. Reuben inhaled the frigid air deep into his lungs and exhaled clouds of heat, curling up to the stars.

THE END



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Richard Stanford, When I'm not writing short stories and essays or producing documentary films in Montréal, I can be found mucking about in my gardens trying to create the perfect eggplant.